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Where Public Theology and Public Administration Meet

Reflections on Jürgen Habermas' Post-Secular Turn

Robert van Putten

PhD-researcher, Department of Political Science and Public Administration,
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, Netherlands
r.j.van.putten@vu.nl

Patrick Overeem

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and
Public Administration, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, Netherlands
p.overeem@vu.nl

Ronald van Steden

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and
Public Administration, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, Netherlands
r.van.steden@vu.nl

Abstract

Since 9/11 Jürgen Habermas has paid considerable attention to religion in the public sphere. He has described contemporary Western societies as 'post-secular', arguing that believers and non-believers should show a mutually cooperative attitude and engage in complementary learning processes. Although public theologians have urged for policies that would encourage such collaboration, public administration scholars and practitioners seem to have completely neglected this call. In this article we inquire into the possibility of a 'post-secular public administration', which grants a more significant place to beneficial forms of religion in modern societies. By presenting a case study on Street Pastors in the British night-time economy we offer an example of both a post-secular religious contribution to the public sphere, as envisaged by Habermas, and a piece of post-secular empirical social science research. Finally, we critically assess Habermas' post-secular turn within the context of a cross-narrative between public theology and public administration.

Keywords

post-secular – public theology – public administration – Jürgen Habermas – Street Pastors

1 Introduction

Despite powerful claims to the contrary, organized religion has so far survived the modernization of society which, according to the classical secularization thesis, would inevitably and irreversibly lead to its evanescence. There is little doubt that religious beliefs and practices have changed, and indeed retracted from the public sphere, in Western societies, since at least the turn of the new millennium. At the same time we have also witnessed a renewed global presence of religion, both in its constructive and destructive forms.¹ Many people will recall the rise of radical Islam, culminating in terrorist attacks in America, Europe, and elsewhere, but there are also many examples of faith-based organizations offering distinctive positive contributions to society.² One example is that of the British Street Pastor movement set up in 2003. These Christian pastors are volunteers who provide safety and assistance to (mostly young) people on a night out. They do so by providing practical help and undertaking immediate action in collaboration with professionals such as police officers, ambulance services, and security guards. The pastors' initiative serves as a vivid illustration of what can be meant by the 'post-secular spaces of the UK's night-time economy':³ they represent a lively mix of religious and non-religious

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- 1 Influential defences of this view have been given in Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ethics and Public Policy Center & Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999) and Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014). For recent counterarguments, see Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Steve Bruce, *Secular Beats Spiritual: The Westernization of the Easternization of the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Kevin McCaffree, *The Secular Landscape: The Decline of Religion in America* (Cham, CH: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017). A brief overview of debates about secularization is Rob Warner, *Secularization and its Discontents* (London: Continuum, 2013).
 - 2 See for example: Malcolm Torry, *Managing God's Business: Religious and Faith-Based Organizations and Their Management* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005).
 - 3 Jennie Middleton and Richard Yarwood, "Christians Out There?" Encountering Street Pastors in the Post-Secular Spaces of UK's Night-Time Economy', *Urban Studies*, 52:3 (2015), 501–516.

citizens who take responsibility for public goods, including mutual care and crime prevention.

The concept of a 'post-secular' turn in society was introduced by the renowned German philosopher Jürgen Habermas,⁴ who has dedicated most of his academic life to understanding modernity as an 'unfinished project' and emphasised the importance of practical and understandable arguments in the public sphere. In so doing, he has argued that deliberation (or 'communicative action') should begin from a post-metaphysical standpoint, rather than from faith-based assumptions and religious convictions. In his later work, however, Habermas has taken a different approach to religion, and has reconsidered the relation between faith and reason. Already in the 1990s, he slowly but surely became concerned about an intellectual-moral 'gap' in left-liberal thinking that fuelled his growing interest in religion. The most immediate trigger for Habermas' work on a 'post-secular' society, however, were the terrorist attacks of 9/11. These events made him realize the continued presence of religion in modern societies and led him to rethink the societal relevance of religion and its potential contributions to liberal democracies. He even entered into a profound conversation with the Catholic philosopher and theologian Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI,⁵ and elaborated on the importance of religion for both civil society and liberal democracy.⁶

In recent years, Habermas' plea for a 'post-secular turn' has been acknowledged and discussed in the field of public theology.⁷ His concept has become central to understanding, problematizing, and reconfiguring religious and secular worldviews in modern society. Together with some others, such as the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, Habermas is currently one of the leading thinkers advocating a new intellectual openness to reasserting the relevance of religious movements and discourses within political and societal debates. Taking this post-secular turn seriously presents 'new and unprecedented challenges at the levels of theory, policy, and practice'⁸ and calls for a reconfiguration

4 Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14:1 (2006), 1–25; Jürgen Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25:4 (2008), 17–29.

5 Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).

6 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

7 Linell E. Cady, 'Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 8:3 (2014), 292–312.

8 Elaine Graham, 'Reflexivity and Rapprochement: Explorations of a "Postsecular" Public Theology', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 11:3 (2017), 277–89 at 277.

of the relationship between public theology and the social sciences, including (so we will argue) the study of public administration. Despite clear differences between both academic fields, public theology and public administration could potentially build promising connections in thinking through what the dawn of a post-secular society may imply for fostering reflexivity among policy-makers, civil servants, and other state-based professionals with regards to a complex and multi-dimensional religious landscape.

Thus far, this public theological acknowledgment of Habermas' work has not yet been accompanied by a similar interest among public administration scholars (and practitioners). They seem to have completely missed the post-secular turn and have neglected this call for reflexivity and collaboration. At the same time, public theologians seem unaware of the potential for concrete manifestations of post-secularism in the sphere of public administration. Hence in this article we aim to relate the two disciplines closer to each other. Although we fully recognize that several public theologians and philosophers, such as Stanley Hauerwas, Oliver O'Donovan, and Charles Taylor, could have been used to further explore post-secularism, we have deliberately limited ourselves to Habermas' ideas here. One reason for this choice (besides coherence and brevity) is that public administration is a very secularist discipline (see more in section three). Hence, we expect a plea for a post-secular stance would be more welcomed by public administration scholars if it comes from another social scientist who also happens to be a recognized liberal and non-religious intellectual. Thus, we hope that Habermas' post-secular turn can function as a 'passage' for public theology and public administration to meet each other.

Our argument unfolds in six sections. To set the scene, the next section briefly presents Habermas' more recent philosophical work on religion in the public sphere and reviews its political-philosophical consequences. The third section highlights and explains the deeply secular character of modern public administration studies *vis-à-vis* public theology's demand for policies which legitimize religious voices and interventions in modern society. The subsequent section explores how reflections from public theologians on Habermas' thesis may benefit public administration scholars, presenting a rough outline of what we call a 'post-secular public administration'. Thereafter, we return to the above-mentioned case of Street Pastors in the British night-time economy that serves both as an empirical illustration of moving beyond the reigning religion-secular divide and as a concrete example of the way in which post-secular social science can be conducted. The article concludes with a critical assessment of the value of Habermas' ideas for the study of a post-secular society from a combined public theology and public administration perspective.

2 Habermas' Post-Secular Turn

Hearing the name of Jürgen Habermas most theologians and social scientists will immediately think of Enlightenment, rationality, and deliberation—and rightly so. Understanding the role of reason in modernity, and in particular advocating communicative reason and rational deliberation in our liberal democracies, has been at the core of his *oeuvre* for about half a century.⁹ Especially in his work from the 1960s to the 1990s, Habermas portrayed religion as part of the pre-modern stage of cultural development, as something incompatible with a modern way of thinking and living—a vision that corresponded well with the secularization thesis dominant in those days.¹⁰ As Calhoun *et al.* have concluded, ‘most of Habermas’ early discussions of religion were contained and were constrained by the assumptions of secularism.’¹¹ No surprise, then, that for many years the topic of religion has played mainly a marginal and negative role in Habermas’ books and articles.

His secularist view on society has changed over the years, however, as a result of several empirical observations about the role of religion in the modern world which cast strong doubts on the long-dominant classical secularization thesis. In line with other sociologists of religion, Habermas started to argue that modernization does not necessarily imply the marginalization of religion, because secularized societies like Western Europe, Canada, and the Australian continent are ‘actually the exception rather than the norm.’¹² He signals a resurgence of religion in other parts of the world and mentions the vibrancy of orthodox or conservative religious communities in, for example, Asia that seem to combine traditional faith with a modern commitment to globalization. Habermas also points towards the growth of fundamentalist religious movements that ‘either combat the modern world or withdraw from it into isolation’¹³ and to the political instrumentalization of religion, including its use of violence in terrorist attacks. Religion is undeniably back (if it ever was gone) on the world stage.

9 Stephen K. White, ‘Reason, Modernity, and Democracy’, in Stephen K. White (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 3–16.

10 Masoumeh Braham, ‘Habermas, Religion, and Public Life’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 28:3 (2013), 353–67.

11 Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 6.

12 Habermas, ‘Notes on Post-Secular Society’, p. 18.

13 Ibid.

More importantly, according to Habermas, secularized Western societies themselves have changed: they have become post-secular.¹⁴ With this concept he does not mean that religious behaviour and convictions in secularized societies have completely changed, nor does he deny that a privatization and individualization of religious practices have taken place. Secularization does 'not necessarily imply that religion *loses influence and relevance* either in the political arena and the culture of a society or in the personal conduct of life'.¹⁵ Instead, for Habermas, becoming post-secular means adopting a more reflexive attitude towards religion in the modern world, as a correction to secular misunderstandings of oneself. In other words, the concept of a post-secular age primarily indicates 'a change in consciousness'¹⁶—that is, an awareness of the remainder of religion that challenges the taken-for-granted self-understanding of the West as secularised.

Habermas identifies three factors that contribute to the awakening of this post-secular consciousness. First, the presence of global religious violence and the just-mentioned vitality of religious communities outside of the West 'undermines the secularistic belief in the *foreseeable disappearance* of religion and robs the secular understanding of the world of any triumphal zest'.¹⁷ Second, on the national level, religious groups remain influential in the public sphere and may even see their influence growing as 'they can attain influence on public opinion and will formation by making relevant contributions to key issues'.¹⁸ Third, through the influx of immigrants, guest-workers, and refugees, religions such as Islam have gained influence in secularized Western societies, which gives a new face to pluralism that goes far beyond the denominational multiplicity within Christianity. Religion thus 'maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernisation is losing ground'.¹⁹

3 The Post-Secular Turn and Its Consequences

The post-secular condition of modern society outlined above brings Habermas to his central political-philosophical question: 'How should we see ourselves as

14 Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society'; Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere'.

15 Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', p. 19 (italics are always in the original, unless otherwise indicated).

16 Ibid., 20.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 21.

members of a post-secular society and what must we reciprocally expect from one another in order to ensure that in firmly entrenched nation states, social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious worldviews?²⁰ It is here that his normative theorizing about religion in the public sphere starts. For Habermas this line of thinking is not only a theoretical, but also, and foremost, an existential question that all European societies must answer—they have to deal with a new reality. He addresses, therefore, the contributions and relevance of religion to modern society, the relationship between religious and non-religious citizens, and the implications of religious contributions for the secular constitutional state. Habermas' position can roughly be positioned between Rawls' secular 'public reason liberalism' on the one hand, and religious 'revisionism' which rejects the liberal condition on the other.²¹ In what follows, we review the implications of his position in more detail.

Habermas believes that today's post-metaphysical way of thinking is characterised by moral disembeddedness, enhanced by modernization processes (such as bureaucratization and marketization) that have eroded commonality and solidarity in civil society. Religion, (implicitly) understood by Habermas as the content of particular belief systems and worldviews which often leads to the participation of faithful people in public life, can positively contribute, therefore, to modern secularized societies; it can function as a vital source of morality and social cohesion that enhances civic commitment to the constitutional state.²² Although the state and democratic society are based on practical reasoning and constitutional patriotism, the exercise of active citizenship is, at least, partially motivated and inspired by pre-political commitments and sources as well.²³ Habermas stresses, therefore, that citizens should be allowed to use religious language in the 'bourgeois' public sphere (or, in non-Habermasian jargon, informal public debates); that is, people should not

20 Ibid.

21 Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere'.

22 See: Jürgen Habermas, *Glaube und Wissen [Faith and Knowledge]* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001); Jürgen Habermas, 'Pre-Political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?', in Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), pp. 21–52; Jürgen Habermas, 'The Political': The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology', in Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 15–33.

23 Whether, for example, Christian churches in the West can actually meet this need remains to be seen, because obviously the modern conditions of bureaucratization and marketization also effect solidarity and communality among Christians and in churches.

be urged to fall back on 'public reason' and 'common sense language' only in expressing themselves.

Habermas gives two additional arguments to make this point. Sometimes people can only speak in religious language. If that is the case, they should not bear the burden of having to translate their arguments in secular terms. Besides, it is important for the democratic process itself not immediately to reduce the complexity of arguments and languages into a secular jargon: 'religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regards to vulnerable forms of communal life'.²⁴ The richness of religious expressions and concepts may get lost in secular language, which makes Habermas think religious contributions should be allowed to be heard. In effect, this post-secular stance requires a profound change in attitude for non-religious citizens. Habermas emphasizes that a secular tolerance towards religious convictions and practices is necessary, but not sufficient. Religious citizens are also members 'of an inclusive community of citizens with equal rights, in which each individual is accountable to the others for his political contributions'.²⁵ The challenge is to combine 'equal citizenship' with 'cultural difference' as complementing elements of an inclusive civil society.

Inclusion of minorities in society is a precondition for this desired state: non-religious citizens must be welcoming towards religious convictions and voices, and should be willing to help with translating religious arguments. Translation has to be a cooperative task. In this regard, Habermas' later work on religion in the public sphere is an adapted continuation of his earlier theory of communicative action.²⁶ His point about communication leads to what is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of Habermas' understanding of the post-secular condition: non-religious citizens must change on the epistemological level.²⁷ In the traditional secularist view, modernization was seen as a learning process for religious citizens only; they had to become self-reflective about their unsustainable position in a plural and modernized society. Becoming post-secular, however, means that non-religious citizens, too, should become self-reflective and accept that religious convictions are not 'purely and simply irrational' and something of the past.²⁸ With his plea for a post-secular society, Habermas thus rejects the secularist position that religion has nothing to offer to modern societies. Instead, he points out that, if both religious and

24 Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', p. 10.

25 Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', p. 23.

26 Braham, 'Habermas, Religion, and Public Life'.

27 Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere'.

28 Habermas, 'Pre-Political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?', in Habermas and Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization*, p. 51.

non-religious people understand secularization as a complementary learning process, 'then they will [...] have cognitive reasons to take seriously each other's contributions to controversial subjects in the public debate'.²⁹

Moreover, we should not confuse 'the neutrality of a secular state in view of competing religious worldviews with the purging of the political public sphere of all religious contributions'.³⁰ State neutrality, Habermas suggests, concerns impartiality towards *all* worldviews and communities, not the exclusion of religions from the public sphere. Both the separation of church and state and the 'public reason' tradition in which he stands remain crucial for Habermas. Therefore, the post-metaphysical foundation of the state and its formal political process, based on common sense and a secular constitution, stays firmly intact: 'every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations'.³¹ Put differently, according to Habermas, there should always be a process of translation—a 'filter'—between formal and informal political discourses, between the sphere of the state and the sphere of church, mosque, and synagogue. Only secular contributions may pass through this filter: 'in a constitutional state, all norms that can be legally implemented must be formulated and *publicly justified* in a language that all the citizens understand'.³² Religious citizens have the right to make use of their own sources and language, but they are obliged to accept the secular state and reject possibly destructive elements in their religion.

4 The Secularized Field of Public Administration

From the above, we can conclude that Habermas' notion of a post-secular society has a double aspect. On the one hand, it contains a sociological and philosophical diagnosis of modern society in which religion is still an important force. On the other hand, it emphasizes that in the formal public sphere, the constitutional state remains fully secular and religious citizens must continue to express their commitment to liberal democracy. This aspiration need not mean that religion should be completely banned from public life. Writing from a public theology viewpoint, Elaine Graham urges 'for the cultivation of public spaces of exchange and shared action which demonstrate how religion works

29 Ibid., p. 47.

30 Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', p. 28.

31 Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', p. 9.

32 Ibid., p. 28.

for people in particular situations, in practice'.³³ This is not an easy task since policy-makers, civil servants, and other public professionals commonly work in a non-religious public sphere shaped by deeply rooted ideas emerging from, amongst others, the secularized study of public administration. How can the down-to-earth engagement with managing public policies and public organisations ever benefit from Habermas' high-flown arguments?

To be sure, some public administration scholars have written about ways in which religion can be considered important for the study and practice of public administration. In an historical study of the intellectual origins of public administration, for instance, Richard Stillman has argued that Protestantism offered an important source of inspiration to many of the field's nineteenth-century founders.³⁴ Likewise, empirical researchers have pointed out that in the modern practice of public administration, religion remains present and influential. Not only do faith-based civil society organisations play a role in public service delivery,³⁵ but many individual public servants also adhere to one faith or another. In fact, David Houston *et al.* have shown that, in the United States at least, employees of public government organisations tend to be more religious than those of private organisations—and naturally this religious belief affects their work.³⁶ Some public employees can give detailed accounts of the ways in which they relate their religious convictions and values to their work, for instance through their sense of 'vocation'.³⁷

In addition, like their colleagues in the fields of business administration, education, and law, public administration scholars have slowly but surely come to pay attention to the role of religion and spirituality in the workplace and to the various practical, legal, and moral questions this raises.³⁸ It will thus

33 Graham, 'Reflexivity and Rapprochement', p. 289.

34 Richard J. Stillman, *Creating the American State: The Moral Reformers and the Modern Administrative World they Made* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1998).

35 Robert Cunningham, 'Religion and Public Administration—The Unacknowledged Common (and Competitive) Ground', *International Journal of Public Administration*, 28:11–12 (2005), 943–55; Michael Bisesi and Russell Lidman, 'Compassion and Power: Religion, Spirituality, and Public Administration', *International Journal of Public Administration*, 32:1 (2009), 4–23.

36 David J. Houston, Patricia K. Freeman and David L. Feldman, 'How Naked is the Public Square? Religion, Public Service, and Implications for Public Administration', *Public Administration Review*, 68:3 (2008), 428–44.

37 Daniel Lowery, 'Self-Reflexivity: A Place for Religion and Spirituality in Public Administration', *Public Administration Review*, 65:3 (2005), 324–34.

38 'Spirituality' is a big topic in business management, but it has also received some attention in public administration. See, for instance: Willa Bruce, 'Spirituality in Public Service', *International Journal of Organization Theory & Behavior*, 3:3/4 (2000), 599–632; Jean-Claude Garcia-Zamor, 'Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance',

come as no surprise that the possible or actual role of religion has also been discussed in administrative ethics. It has been argued, for example, that the role of values in public administration can only be grasped well if not only (constitutional) 'regime values' are taken into account, but religious values too.³⁹ In other words, to understand the ethical inspiration of public employees, knowledge has to be sought from what is called the 'Judeo-Christian' tradition⁴⁰ and from other world religions.⁴¹ Nevertheless, these studies are few and far between, and many of them indeed emphasise the relative lack of attention to the topic. For most public administration scholars, the subject of religion has simply remained off the radar—or is restricted to the margins, regarded as a general threat to be kept at bay.

Several explanations, ranging from very general to very specific, can be given for this secular blind spot in administrative thinking about the nature of modern governments and societies. Historically, public administration as an academic field emerged from, and was built on, key tenets of the Enlightenment.⁴² The rejection of a higher moral authority beyond individual reason was, therefore, widely accepted and has arguably been one of the strongest drivers of secularization of Western thought and practice. Precursors of public administration as an academic discipline, such as 'cameralism' and *Verwaltungswissenschaft* in Germany and *science administrative* in France, which were directly inspired by the Enlightenment, lacked any meaningful relationship with religious thought and practice. Max Weber, one of the greatest intellectual fathers of European administrative thought, was virulently opposed to Christianity. A Nietzschean in outlook and temperament, he argued for banishing religious presuppositions from both politics and science—

Public Administration Review, 63:3 (2003), 355–364; David J. Houston & Katherine E. Cartwright, 'Spirituality and Public Service', *Public Administration Review*, 67:1 (2007), 88–102; Stephen M. King, 'Religion, Spirituality, and the Workplace: Challenges for Public Administration', *Public Administration Review*, 67:1 (2007), 103–14; and Mark L. McConkie (ed.), 'Spirituality and the Public Sector: An Introduction', *International Journal of Public Administration*, 31:4 (2008), 337–341 as well as other symposium contributions in the same issue. Most of this literature stresses the positive effects of spirituality for employee motivation and performance.

39 Stephen M. King, 'Toward a New Administrative Ethic: An Understanding and Application of the Judeo-Christian Tradition to Administrative Issues', *Public Integrity*, 2:1 (2000), 17–28.

40 Robert T. Golembiewski, *Men, Management, and Morality* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

41 Thomas D. Lynch, Richard Omdal, and Peter L. Cruise, 'Secularization of Public Administration', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 7:3 (1997), 473–87.

42 Mark R. Rutgers, *De Verlichte Bestuurskundige* [*The Enlightened Public Administration Scholar*]. Inaugural lecture, Leiden University (2003). Retrieved from: <<https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/4503>>, [March 11, 2019].

even though both *Politics as a Vocation* (1919) and *Science as a Vocation* (1919) are full of Biblical quotes and allusions.⁴³ Finally, in the United States, the intellectual roots of public administration can mainly be found in the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth century and in the Scientific Management of the early twentieth.⁴⁴ Both movements were driven more by considerations of effectiveness and technical efficiency than by moral, let alone religious ones.

A related cause of the neglect of religion in public administration as an academic discipline is more epistemological in nature. Since the Second World War, Anglo-American public administration has drawn heavily on logical positivism and its strict distinction between 'scientific' and 'metaphysical' language. On this view, most strongly promoted by Herbert Simon, administrative science and practice are about facts; values should play only a limited role in decision-making since they are sub-rational and not subject to scientific argument.⁴⁵ The secularization thesis mentioned earlier, which found general acceptance among social scientists and students of public administration during the second half of the twentieth century, has further decreased attention for religion in public administration research and teaching.

More fundamentally, the study of public administration is founded on the modernist dichotomies of state/society, public/private, and politics/administration.⁴⁶ In the liberal view, which draws heavily on such dichotomies, government is a structure of procedural institutions that grants all citizens the same rights to pursue their own reasonable conceptions of the good without prioritising either side of the dichotomy. The implication is that politics can deal with values, and possibly religion, but public administration must stick to the facts, and to science. While perhaps in the legislature and the presidency religious utterances can be tolerated, albeit with caution, other parts of government, such as the judiciary and particularly the bureaucracy, should be neutral.⁴⁷ Indeed, many fear that religion is actually harmful to society. In particular the political rise of the conservative Christian Right in America has led to a widespread uneasiness with religion as such.⁴⁸ The undeniable existence

43 Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures: Politics as a Vocation, Science as a Vocation* (edited and with an introduction by D. Owen and T.B. Strong) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004).

44 Dwight Waldo, *The Administrative State: A study of the Political Theory of American Public Administration* (2nd ed.) (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984).

45 Herbert A. Simon, *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization* (4th ed.) (New York: Free Press, 1997); Lynch, Omdal and Cruise, 'Secularization of Public Administration'.

46 Mark R. Rutgers, 'Splitting the Universe: On the Relevance of Dichotomies for the Study of Public Administration', *Administration and Society*, 32:2 (2001), 3–20.

47 Lynch, Omdal and Cruise, 'Secularization of Public Administration'.

48 Houston, Freeman and Feldman, 'How Naked is the Public Square?'

of religiously inspired dogmatism, violence, bigotry, and discrimination leads many to conclude that religion should be actively excluded from public life in general, and from government in particular.

We can thus safely conclude that, overall, the study and practice of public administration is highly secular. Religion is simply not considered a topic of much interest, let alone a positive influence. And, in the rare studies that do address religion as a noteworthy topic, two things are striking. The first is that religion remains often abstract and unspecified. Those who write about it often do so in a general sense, without distinguishing between different religions and without looking carefully into distinct religious beliefs and practices. Here public theology could undoubtedly offer more detail and nuance. A second, and for now more important point, is that Habermas' insights about post-secularism are entirely absent in the public administration literature. If scholars do mention his work, they discuss other and older elements of his thinking, such as communicative rationality, the colonisation of the life sphere, and Enlightenment rationalism.⁴⁹ Neither his post-secular turn, nor public theology's critical reflections on this turn seem to get any attention in public administration studies. Hence, it seems pertinent to show the implications of Habermas' insights about post-secularism society for connecting public theology and public administration.

5 Post-Secular Public Administration

Having seen the deeply secular character of the study of public administration, we now come to our core question: How can Habermas' post-secular turn possibly serve public theology's and public administration's reflections and mutual inspiration? In advance, however, a critical remark is due. Habermas offers not only a rather murky conceptualisation of religion, but he also leaves open what his post-secular turn exactly implies. As Linell Cady has put it, 'for some it is a way to make room for religion in its conventional forms in public life; for others, it highlights new or neglected forms of religiosity; still others use it to move the constraints of the religion-secular framework that has structured the modern western social imaginary'.⁵⁰ We will mainly draw on the latter interpretation of post-secularism since a growing body of knowledge

49 See for example: Terrence Kelly, 'Unlocking the Iron Cage: Public Administration in the Deliberative Democratic Theory of Jürgen Habermas', *Administration and Society*, 36:1 (2004), 38–61.

50 Cady, 'Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn', 298.

in theology and the social sciences highlight the need for revising the bipolar religion-secular model.

Taking up Habermas' focus on post-secular theory and praxis is obviously a challenge to the dominant worldview in public administration. As shown in the previous section, the study of public administration has a highly secularized outlook on society and ascribes hardly any relevance to religion. Public administration literature has acknowledged megatrends such as globalization, individualization, and digitalization, but generally neglected the role (and return) of religion in the public sphere. Of course, paying more attention to religion also challenges other elements of the modernist public administrative worldview, such as the aforementioned strict liberal dichotomies between 'the public' and 'the private' in relation to religious convictions. Working under a post-secular condition means doing justice to a social reality in which a multifaceted religious landscape continues to be important. Moreover, public theology's charge is to move beyond religion-secular divisions and 'illuminate the co-production of the religious and the secular, their oppositional logic, as well as their intersections and mutual reconfigurations'.⁵¹ Making a post-secular turn in public administration implies that Habermas' idea of a complementary learning process must be taken seriously.

Adopting a post-secularist approach to public administration will have further consequences. Just as citizens and public officials recognize the epistemological weight of religious contributions, likewise public administration scholars (and their students who will be future policy-makers and civil servants) will in a way become post-secular themselves by acknowledging the same. In research and education, they will recognise the potential practical wisdom of religion for governmental and political issues. This may even lead to a rethinking of public administration's strong focus on 'value-neutral' scientific knowledge, to pay more attention to normatively-inspired traditions of practical wisdom. Here too, Habermas' turn towards religion can help us to develop a more broadly inspired study of public administration that seeks the relevance of religion less in rational and universal *episteme* and more in *phronesis*.⁵² In the end, becoming post-secular means accepting the possibility that religion can be relevant for public policy.

A concrete puzzle is what, under post-secular conditions, the appropriate ways of governing the public sphere would actually be. In trying to answer this question, scholars may stay close to Habermas and analyze how his ideas

51 Cady, 'Public Theology and the Postsecular Turn', 307.

52 Bjent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

about a 'complementary learning process' between religious and non-religious citizens works out in practice and how it can be mediated by public officials. Critics, however, have pointed out potential problems with the idea of a complementary learning process between believers and non-believers and with the division between allowing for religious contributions in the informal ('bourgeois') public sphere on the one hand and 'filtering' such contributions in the secular formal (statist) public sphere on the other.⁵³ Empirical research by both public theologians and public administration scholars can enrich these theoretical debates. What is the actual contribution that religious citizens can and do make to civil society and democratic deliberation? How do cooperative attitudes of translating religious contributions into secular ones work in practice? What does the collaboration between state organisations and faith-based organisations in their common pursuit of the common good look like in reality?

Endorsing Habermas' ideas and developing a post-secular study of public administration would, in most cases, imply a change in the contents of its studies as well. To understand our contemporary society and the contributions of both religious and non-religious citizens therein, public administration students would have to acquire at least some basic understanding of theology or (comparative) religious studies. Public theologians and sociologists could provide some 'religious literacy' to students. Currently, this kind of education is often lacking: 'not only are people ill-equipped to understand the impact of religion on world affairs, [...] but they are lamentably ignorant of the religious roots of their own cultural heritage as well as those of their neighbours'.⁵⁴ A curriculum change is obviously hard to achieve, but public administration students need to know about the functioning of religion in society and about its civic and public contributions to the public sphere. Likewise, they would have to be taught (the philosophy of) public law in order to better understand the legal relationships between government and religion, including issues concerning the separation between church and state, in order to prevent simplistic ideas about state neutrality. In line with Habermas' argument, such rapprochement between public theology and public administration would begin

53 James W. Boettcher, 'Habermas, Religion and the Ethics of Citizenship', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 35:1–2 (2009), 215–38; Cathrine Holst and Anders Molander, 'Jürgen Habermas on Public Reason and Religion: Do Religious Citizens Suffer an Asymmetrical Cognitive Burden, and Should They be Compensated?', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 18:5 (2015), 547–63; Adil Usturali, 'Religion in Habermas's Two-Track Political Theory', *The European legacy*, 22:5 (2017), 566–82.

54 Graham, 'Reflexivity and Rapprochement', p. 286.

by accepting a post-secular condition that is inclusive and collaborative towards religion and its relevance for public life.

6 Street Pastors

Thus far, we have followed in Habermas' footsteps and theorized the contours of a post-secular study of public administration. We now turn to the Street Pastors already mentioned in our introductory section and provide a case-study that can serve as an example of the way in which religious practices can become closely intertwined with public administration practices in a way that echoes Habermas' post-secular viewpoints. This case study also serves as an example of post-secular public administration research.

A few years ago, one of the authors of this article immersed himself in a team of Street Pastors working in Cardiff's night-time economy. The pastors are Christian volunteers who provide safety and care in a non-pressurising manner to (mostly young) people in the party scene. Their trademark activity is offering emotional support and practical care to often drunk people—usually by having a chat and handing out things that might be useful to them in their condition: plastic water bottles to sober up partygoers and pink flip-flops to girls who are unable to walk on high heels. On the basis of this case-study, Street Pastors were found to confine themselves to 'making people safe' and 'caring for people': their work is all about looking after intoxicated fellow citizens who have been enjoying a night out. In this respect, they provide exemplary theologically grounded ways of 'being with' the vulnerable in order to build a friendly relationship with them. Police officers respond enthusiastically to their work. One even argued that 'Street Pastors mellow things down, spend time with people ... they have a great impact'. The pastors are driven by their Christian faith that everyone is valuable in the eyes of God and deserving of kind attention.⁵⁵

During their 'tour of duty', the pastors have regular contact with a wide variety of professionals in the night-time economy: police, door-staff, paramedics, the CCTV control room, taxi marshals, partygoers, and other visitors. In fact, Street Pastors embody a genuine information hub for the police and for local public administrators since they provide data about, amongst other

55 Ronald van Steden, *Living by Love: Street Pastors, Care and Public Safety in Cardiff's Night-Time Economy* (report). Cardiff/Amsterdam: Cardiff University/Vrije Universiteit (2014), retrieved from <<https://research.vu.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/1073782/141215+Street+Pastors+Final+report.pdf>>, [March 11, 2019].

things, people who look suspicious, bartenders who serve too much alcohol, and accumulating piles of waste in certain 'hot spots' of nightlife areas. The strong information position of Street Pastors highlights their central place in a wider public administrative framework of public-private partnership between agents and agencies. It is also reasonable to assume that, through their caring activities, Street Pastors genuinely contribute to the prevention of crime and disorder. As research shows, they are currently dealing with some hundred incidents each month, pick up dozens of glass bottles, and hand out stacks of items to people, all of which is a sizeable achievement, considering there are only two small teams of volunteers available on Friday and Saturday nights.⁵⁶

Research on the practice of Street Pastoring follows the spirit rather than the letter of Habermas' writings on the post-secular society. Street Pastoring, after all, is not about ideal dialogue and deliberation as Habermas proposed in his seminal work, but about providing practical help and undertaking immediate action in collaboration with nightlife professionals such as police officers, ambulance services, and private security guards. Nevertheless, the Street Pastor initiative does arise from civil society—in Habermas' terminology, the informal public sphere—and thus serves as a vivid illustration of what the post-secular society could possibly entail: a lively fusion of religious citizens and non-religious institutions who take responsibility for public goods, including community safety and mutual care.

Furthermore, the Street Pastor case shows how personal and publicly-lived faith can deliver a positive impact on society, something that is in line with Habermas' cautious appreciation of religion in the public domain. Street Pastors are committed volunteers whose motivations for their voluntary work are diverse. These reasons might include 'having fun' or 'showing civic engagement', but most volunteers say they are driven by a deep spiritual unity with God and a commitment to the Biblical tradition. The immediate implication of this faith-based engagement is that Street Pastors do their work explicitly as Christians: their faith is the key driver behind their desire to help vulnerable youngsters in the night-life economy. They do so not by handing out Bibles, but simply by acting as good Samaritans who care about people in their local communities.

Finally, in their post-secular nightlife environment, Street Pastors are not immediately recognizable as Christians, because they consciously avoid overt religious symbols such as the cross or the dove. They wear ordinary blue caps, polo shirts, and jackets marked with the words 'Street Pastor' in white, a style

56 See also: Ronald van Steden, 'Street Pastors: On Security, Care and Faith in the British Night-Time Economy', *European Journal of Criminology*, 15:4 (2018) 403–420.

of dress that underlines the fact that Street Pastors acknowledge and abide by the secular environment of public space. In doing so, they show their commitment to a plural liberal democracy to an even greater extent than Habermas requires: their neutral clothing cloaks their Christian background, not only in the formal public sphere of politics and governance, but even in the informal sphere of civil society and street-life.

In line with this illustration, post-secular social scientists could be more open to the actual contributions that faith-based (civil society) organisations can, and often do, make in the handling of social problems. They may learn from the evolution undergone by Habermas himself: he has shifted from critical observer of capitalist societies and the role of religion therein to philosopher appreciating tolerance and mutual sympathy between religious and non-religious people. As the Street Pastor case makes clear, this evolution does not mean that Christian faith should be completely neutralized or annulled. For many volunteers such as the pastors, Christianity still serves as a major inspiration to come into action and do something worthwhile for society. In terms of interdisciplinary research, then, both public theology and public administration have much to gain from qualitative and interpretative approaches to the worldviews, religious beliefs, and values of people active in public life. This case opens up a whole new area of research and knowledge that will enrich our understanding of how the post-secular public sphere is functioning in Western democratic societies.

7 Concluding Reflections

With his post-secular position, Habermas shows that in social life and social science there is a promising alternative to militant secularism, on the one hand, and fundamentalist religious dogmatism on the other hand. He demonstrates that religion is not only relevant for religious people, but also for non-religious people, indeed for post-secular society as a whole. His understanding of our post-secular society could possibly build bridges between (public) theologians and social scientists, not least public administration scholars. His ideas also offer a sociological foundation for and philosophical legitimation to the already existing small body of literature on religion in public administration reviewed above. From a Habermasian perspective, this literature has rightly started to address issues that need further attention at the nexus of religion and public administration.

Why should public theologians and public administration scholars collaborate more firmly? First of all, paying attention to religion means doing justice

to a social reality and, therefore, has policy relevancy. This point can easily be underlined by two other arguments from Habermas' *oeuvre*: first, the quality of democratic deliberation and civic commitment ('constitutional patriotism') can be enhanced by acknowledging the continued importance of religion in Western societies, and second, religion can fill the spiritual and moral gap that rationalization and (neoliberal) capitalism have unintentionally produced in people's lives. The case-study on Street Pastors also demonstrates the practical relevance of religious commitment, showing how a faith-based practice contributes to public health and safety through civil society contributions. To this particular example many more could be added, ranging from those that are explicitly Christian (e.g., the Salvation Army) to other more implicit ones (e.g., Restorative Justice). Finally, we live in times of religious as well as secularist polarization that could use some Habermasian moderation.⁵⁷ Collaborations between public theology and public administration may contribute to more tolerant and peaceful societies.

We acknowledge that we have mainly concentrated on the positive contributions religious people and practices could have in the public sphere. It is entirely clear that combined studies in public theology and public administration could also deal with more negative and even harmful and utterly dangerous religious practices. In the study of religiously inspired discrimination and violence, for instance, and the governance surrounding it, both disciplines could also support each other much more than they do now.

As explained in the introductory section, we have limited ourselves in this article to Habermas' contribution only. Of course, this decision does not mean that his views are sufficient for developing a post-secular perspective, or that his thought is entirely unproblematic. Indeed, while we believe that Habermas provides a useful approach to a post-secular understanding of Western societies, his work also has its limitations. Habermas nowhere properly defines the post-secular condition and he has little to say about the praxis of everyday governance—like, for example, the interactions between religiously inspired Street Pastors, diverse groups of partygoers, and formally secular professionals, such as police officers and door staff. Understandably, Habermas himself does not theorize about these issues (his life-time philosophical project concerns citizen deliberation), but from the viewpoint of a post-secular public administration it is vital to reach beyond 'open communication' and address the place of religiously inspired practices in a post-secular society. Can public professionals perhaps help to translate religious language into secular language (and

57 Harry M. Clor, *On Moderation: Defending an Ancient Virtue in a Modern World*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

vice versa) or should they remain completely neutral representatives of the government?

Here enters the risk of instrumentalizing religion for governing purposes. We have several times stressed the policy relevance of acknowledging the role of religion in public life. This emphasis contains the possibility that governments and its policy makers only selectively attempt to benefit from religious contributions as 'means' for their own 'ends'. In modern life this risk of instrumentalization is never far away and governments have a built-in tendency to act (at least partially) from an instrumental point of view. As both public theologians and public administration scholars we should remain critical, raise our voices when this risk becomes real, and contribute to the development of less-instrumentalist alternatives.

Both secular and Christian philosophers have argued that Habermas' post-secular turn is not radical enough to offer a convincing alternative for Rawls' public reason liberalism.⁵⁸ The common message of these often very different critics is that Habermas' post-secular turn is only half-hearted and, therefore, unconvincing: he should either remain radically secular or he should embrace religion 'from within' and not only functionally. If these criticisms, or either of them, are indeed correct, we may need to alter Habermas' post-secular framework and start searching for additional philosophical and theological frameworks. The problems surrounding his normative position, however, do not undermine the core sociological message that present-day Western societies are not radically secularistic. Neither does it undermine his argument that modern society should take the role of religion in public life more seriously. Thus, in our view, the best way to deal with the limits of Habermas' work is to take it as an inspiring starting point for further carving out an interdisciplinary space in which public theologians and public administration scholars come together to reflect on the challenges of a post-secular era.

58 Jay M. Bernstein, 'Forgetting Isaac: Faith and the Philosophical Impossibility of a Post-secular Society', in Calhoun, Mendieta, VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Habermas and Religion*, pp. 154–75. Maeve Cooke, 'The Limits of Learning: Habermas' Social Theory and Religion', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 24:4 (2014), 694–711; Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy* (edited by T. Cuneo) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).